

St Erth Parish Council – 9th April 2024

Report of the Estate Working Group – Agenda Item 9

Options Appraisal for the Vestry Rooms – Grade II Listed Building

Introduction:

The Vestry Rooms, a Grade II listed Council-owned building, is currently in a state of disrepair, exhibiting significant issues such as damp penetration, woodworm activity, severe timber decay, and a deteriorating roof. Given its current state and the associated ongoing utility costs, the Council is faced with a decision regarding the future of the property. This options appraisal outlines various possibilities for the Vestry Rooms, considering both the restoration and sale options.

Option 1 – Restoration and Preservation as a building for Council use only

Pros:

- Addresses the current disuse and deterioration of the building
- Preserves the building's historic value, aligning with the Council's commitment to preserving historical and listed buildings
- Retains a building the Council can use for meetings, thereby avoiding the need to rent space at the School

Cons:

- High costs associated with extensive restoration work – estimate £150,000
- Ongoing utility costs – estimate £60 per month
- Ongoing maintenance expenses to prevent further decay
- No revenue generation
- May not address the need for a functional and economically viable use

Considerations:

- Heritage grants and funding opportunities – unlikely if sole use of Council so likely to be a Public Works Loan (PWL) which would require public support
- Long-term commitment to maintenance and upkeep
- Consultation with historical preservation experts

Risks:

- Council likely to need a PWL which could significantly increase precept (25%)
- Without public support a PWL would not be approved
- Renovation costs could escalate due to unforeseen structural issues

Option 2 – Restoration and Adaptive Reuse for Community Purposes

Pros:

- Addresses the current disuse and deterioration of the building
- Preserves the building's historic value, aligning with the Council's commitment to preserving historical and listed buildings
- May address a community need and enhance community engagement and cohesion
- Retains a building the Council can use for meetings, thereby avoiding the need to rent space at the School
- Potential for grants or funding for community projects.

Cons:

- High costs associated with extensive restoration work – estimate £150,000
- Ongoing utility costs – estimate £60 per month
- Ongoing maintenance expenses to prevent further decay
- Limited revenue generation
- Balancing the historical significance with modern functional requirements
- May not address the need for a functional and economically viable use
- Competing with other already established venues in the community

Considerations:

- Identify community needs and potential uses – none identified following survey
- Explore partnerships with local organisations for joint ventures – local organisations have other more suitable venues
- Assess potential funding sources for community projects – Community Levelling Up funding now closed; would be hard to justify a bid in return for space created

Risks:

- If no grant funding, would require a PWL which could significantly increase precept (25%)
- Without public support a PWL would not be approved
- Renovation costs could escalate due to unforeseen structural issues

Option 3: Restoration and Change of Use to Residential Conversion, retaining in Council ownership

Pros:

- Addresses the current disuse and deterioration of the building
- Preserves the building's historic value, aligning with the Council's commitment to preserving historical and listed buildings
- Conversion to a one-bedroom cottage could contribute to local housing needs
- The Council retains control over the restoration process, ensuring adherence to preservation standards
- Restored properties often have higher market values, providing a potential return on investment if decided to sell at a later date

Cons:

- May face challenges obtaining planning permission for residential use
- Extensive repairs, including addressing damp penetration, woodworm, and timber decay, could incur substantial expenses.
- Restoration projects typically take time, delaying potential returns and incurring ongoing maintenance costs
- Unexpected challenges may arise during the restoration, leading to additional costs and delays
- High upfront conversion costs – estimate £170,000
- Ongoing management and costs of property once converted

Considerations:

- Conduct a feasibility study for residential conversion – initial discussions with planning consultant and architect held regarding planning permission & building regulations
- Engage with local planning authorities and neighbouring properties
- Explore potential partnerships with housing developers – one property so may not be of interest

- Funding options available – PWL would require public support; TT to investigate other with Cornwall Council
- SEPC NDP Policy CBF1 Conservation of community buildings – a survey has already been carried out regarding community need for the building (vii) and it is evident that alternative provision is available within the parish with better accessibility (viii)
- How project would be managed – would need to be outsourced

Risks:

- May not get planning permission
- Income generated through social rent may not be enough to cover PWL repayments so could result in increase in precept to cover shortfall
- Without public support a PWL would not be approved
- Lack of income when property is not occupied
- Ability to manage property
- Renovation costs could escalate due to unforeseen structural issues
- Community may be opposed to conversion of historic building

Option 4 – Sale with Planning Permission for Residential Conversion

Pros:

- Selling the property without restoration reduces the financial burden on the Council
- The buyer can undertake the restoration, potentially faster and more efficiently
- The Council can realise immediate returns by selling with planning permission
- Will release funding for other capital projects (valued at £155,000 in November 2023 with planning permission)

Cons:

- May face challenges obtaining planning permission for residential use
- Selling the property as-is might not align with preservation objectives, potentially impacting the building's historical value
- The Council relinquishes control over the restoration process and the property's future use
- The success of the sale depends on prevailing market conditions and the attractiveness of the property to potential buyers

Considerations:

- Conduct a feasibility study for residential conversion – initial discussions with planning consultant and architect held regarding planning permission & building regulations
- Engage with local planning authorities and neighbouring properties
- Establish clear criteria for the type of development permitted
- Carefully vet potential buyers
- Include preservation clauses in sale or lease agreements
- Costs involved to obtain relevant planning and market property (estimated at £3,000)
- SEPC NDP Policy CBF1 Conservation of community buildings – a survey has already been carried out regarding community need for the building (vii) and it is evident that alternative provision is available within the parish with better accessibility (viii)

Risks:

- May not get planning permission
- Property may not sell for amount acceptable to Council
- Community may be opposed to conversion of historic building

Option 5: Hybrid Approach - Restoration and Sale

Pros:

- Addresses the current disuse and deterioration of the building
- Preserves the building's historic value, aligning with the Council's commitment to preserving historical and listed buildings
- Conversion to a one-bedroom cottage could contribute to local housing needs
- Undertaking essential repairs while marketing the property can enhance its appeal to potential buyers
- The Council retains control over the restoration process, ensuring adherence to preservation standards
- The Council can benefit from increased property value without undertaking the full conversion

Cons:

- Managing both restoration and marketing concurrently requires careful resource allocation
- Coordinating restoration and sale processes may extend the timeline for realising returns
- Success still relies on favourable market conditions and buyer interest
- Extensive repairs, including addressing damp penetration, woodworm, and timber decay, could incur substantial expenses
- Restoration projects typically take time, delaying potential returns and incurring ongoing maintenance costs
- Unexpected challenges may arise during the restoration, leading to additional costs and delays
- High costs of extensive restoration work – estimate £150,000

Considerations:

- Conduct a feasibility study for residential conversion – initial discussions with planning consultant and architect held regarding planning permission & building regulations
- Engage with local planning authorities and neighbouring properties
- SEPC NDP Policy CBF1 Conservation of community buildings – a survey has already been carried out regarding community need for the building (vii) and it is evident that alternative provision is available within the parish with better accessibility (viii)
- Funding

Risks:

- Council likely to need a PWL which could significantly increase precept (25%)
- Without public support a PWL would not be approved
- Property may not sell for amount acceptable to Council
- Renovation costs could escalate due to unforeseen structural issues
- Community may be opposed to conversion of historic building

Option 6: Demolition and Redevelopment

Pros:

- Clears the site for new development that aligns with current needs
- Removes the financial burden of maintaining a deteriorating structure
- Can generate revenue through the sale of the cleared land

Cons:

- Irreversible loss of a Grade II listed building
- Potential public opposition due to historical significance
- May face challenges obtaining demolition permits

Considerations:

- Assess local sentiment and potential public resistance
- Explore alternative development options that retain some historical elements
- Ensure compliance with local planning regulations

Risks:

- May not get permission to demolish
- Community may be opposed to demolition of historic building
- Land may not sell

Recommendation

The Council faces an important decision regarding the future of the Vestry Rooms, balancing preservation goals, financial considerations, and community needs. Given the critical condition of the building, doing nothing is no longer an option. The Working Group has spent some time discussing all six options outlined here, each of which comes with its own set of advantages and challenges.

The option to demolish the building was discounted as not appropriate due to the historical significance of the building, and the Council's own aims to preserve historic buildings.

Whilst the Working Group is aware that restoration and reuse of the building as a Council or Community building may be favoured by some residents, it believes that the cost of undertaking this restoration cannot be justified in terms of the benefits it will provide the community.

The Working Group therefore recommends that Council:

- agrees to apply for planning permission to convert to residential use and sells with permission in place – the building currently sits within a residential area so would fit with the locality; the outer historic character of the building will be retained; this will generate a significant amount of money that can then be used to fund other capital projects that will benefit the community as opposed to the building being an ongoing drain on the community purse;
- undertakes early engagement with the community, particularly neighbouring properties, regarding proposed plans;
- takes professional advice regarding type of planning permission to apply for – permission in principle or a full planning application;
- agrees that the Building Maintenance Earmarked Reserves be used for any costs incurred;
- engages the relevant professionals to undertake the work required.